

# The Beat

By Peter David Smith

In Glastonbury, in 1972, as teenagers we played science fiction games of pretend.

We pretended to be time travellers from the 1950s, Beatniks misplaced in time, exploring the 1970s.

Kris and Aline ran a macrobiotic cafe at the back of the carpark by the Lamb Inn (The Who'd A Thought It?). They allowed me to distribute "I'm a Beatnik" badges in their cafe. They had their own unique clothing style which, in retrospect, looked like New Romantics were going to look, eight or nine years in the future.

I didn't know very much about beatniks but I was very interested to find out as much as possible. I hadn't read "On the Road" but I had heard Paul Simon's "Sound of Silence" and "America" and "Bookends". I had heard Donovan's "Season of the Witch" and "Sunshine Superman" and "Mellow Yellow". My beatniks, in my mind, were timewarped beatniks.

Sometimes we pretended to be Victorian or Edwardian time travellers using H.G. Wells' machine. Sometimes "Bright Young Things" from the 1920s/30s.

Sometimes we were from the future or from parallel worlds and fantasy realms. Everyday was a cubist fragmented L.A.R.P.

Four or five years later, when I was in my early 20s, being brainwashed in the Emin cult, there was a group usher called Pilgrim/Stephen who ran a group called The Emin Ceremonies. They specialised in theatrical performance art interpretations of Gurdjieff/Ouspensky/Leo types of Esoteric/Occult/Religious ideas. I went to one of their meetings and Pilgrim/Stephen suddenly pointed at me and commanded me with the words "Give us THE BEAT!!!"

I had no idea what he wanted me to do.

I sat there, puzzled, and shrugged my shoulders saying "Umm, sorry, what beat???"

Pilgrim/Stephen pointed at me again and commanded "Give us THE BEAT!!!"

Still I didn't know what he wanted me to do. I had no background in music. The school I had been to as a boy in the 1960s didn't teach us music. I said, "What sort of beat do you mean???"

Pilgrim/Stephen gave up on my lack of comprehension and went back to talking to the whole room in a more general way. I continued puzzling over what this "beat" was that he wanted me to give to everyone.

I began to wonder if he had heard somehow about the timewarp games we used to play. Was that what he wanted me to talk about? I didn't know. Anyway, how would he know about that? I had never talked to him about the LARPing.

As I got older I did, eventually, read Kerouac, Ginsburg and Burroughs, the "K.G. and B." of the beatniks. I found them interesting. I thought that I probably wouldn't have liked the beat generation very much if I had ever been able to travel back to the 50s and meet them for real. But I still found them fascinating.

The beat goes on. The heart likes what it likes. The mad ones still go mad.

Nothing changes while everything does. The chaos at the centre of all existence gets into our hearts and minds. We make of it whatever we can.

My impression of the beat generation is of art school students, poets and budding young writers travelling around, going anywhere to experience anything. Drawn onward by both the things everyone liked and things no one liked. Concerned with learning by experience and reaching some sort of enlightenment, but messed up by drugs and the forces of social conformity. By the time I had reached *my* teens the beats had faded into the background while the hippies took over and even the hippies were in the process of fading into the background of the “Freak Scene” or “Alternative Society”. Then I was tricked into joining the Emin and getting mind-controlled. When I got away from the Emin it was 1980, I was 27 and even punk was beginning to fade into the background of New Romantic, Proto-Goth, New Wave, Post Punk.

Beatniks had a bit of a revival amongst the timewarped New Romantics and I began to feel more at home. The music got better as well, happy and soulful synth bands, often with emotional saxophone gut-driven jazz tones.

I remember going to marches and demos of Rock Against Racism and Ban Cruise Missiles, wearing a badge which said “*How Dare You Assume that I’m a Heterosexual?*” World Music became a thing, largely due to the efforts of Peter Gabriel and David Byrne. The “*avant garde*” was back! The most well known poets in Britain were John Cooper Clarke and Linton Kwesi Johnstone. Punk poets appearing at music gigs was a thing. Benjamin Zephaniah was up and coming.

I don’t know much about the beat, but *something* goes on.

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